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Final Report  

National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health

My time at the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health started early June. On my first day, I would not have guessed that as a result of doing this internship a new passion for social justice was going to grow in me. I was prepared for the internship with an open mind, to listen to and consider new perspectives, but I did not expect to develop on so many different levels. Because of the wealth of information I was provided with at my internship, the different stages of learning I had to experience, and the great challenges I underwent this summer, I discovered the link between my interests for social, political, and cultural issues and the ways in which I can use a social justice framework into my future studies, speech, and everyday living.

During my first day, my supervisor, Stephanie Alvarado, was the first to welcome me into the office. She took the time to introduce herself and quickly showed me around the office, my workspace, and lastly, introduced me to Jessica Gonzales, who was recently promoted to Executive Director. The two other interns who worked in the New York office came in shortly after I had received instructions on how to log into my email account, had reviewed my work plan (agenda), and chatted with her about the Community Mobilization (CM) department. Paola Martinez, another intern from the Dominican Republic in the CM department, and Heather Ramirez, of Mexican parents, who worked closely with the Communications department this summer, both introduced themselves with an enthusiastic smile for the busy summer that was ahead of us.

The first week started with a series of conversations with Paola. We spoke about our
experiences studying in the US and applying to internships. She told me how she was fortunate that the Latina Institute had given her a second chance to work out an internship with them since previous circumstances with her newborn child had made it extremely difficult for her to split her time. My story wasn't as compelling as her story, but we found many similarities between them. As we got to know each other more we started working on preliminary things such as learning about the organization's work history. We spoke to some of the staff members who were at the office during the first couple days and also started on our individual tasks. Stephanie had encouraged me to begin thinking about the large projects even if the intern workshop was not until the following week. I was eager to start the summer.

I went searching in the SHARED folder, looking to learn as much about the organization as I could, observing and listening to the staff members to learn about the current work that was taking place, and for the next weeks, thought about ways I could help advance (at least through my own endeavors as an intern) the organization's advocacy work. It was a strong and hectic start, and the following weeks came in with exceedingly more expectations, many goals to meet, and a lot of work to do.

During the first two weeks at the Latina Institute, I worked on two documents I later learned were more important for the CM department than I had originally thought. The civic engagement document I was asked to write consisted of a list of basic information about ways in which documented and undocumented immigrant Latin@ folks can get involved in community work. The task was to create a document that both informs its readers about the different ways they could involve themselves, mobilize, organize, etc, in their communities, as well as to encourage readers to take action. This was not as difficult to write as other documents I wrote for
the organization given that I only had to condense the information of a civic engagement pamphlet (previously written by staff members in the CM department) into a single page. This activity was simple and intriguing as I had to write the document both in English and in Spanish. Although I had started this project early in summer, it wasn't completed until two or three weeks afterwards. In fact, I ran into these kinds of time management issues with a few other projects.

One other project I had faced similar scheduling issues on was a 'Know Your Rights' document intended for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. This was never completely finished during the summer due to other scheduling issues within the CM department. Here, I conducted extensive research and took notes on the rights of undocumented and documented immigrants. I visited the websites of partner organizations, human and civil rights organizations, the U.S. constitution, and came across important information about immigration policies that were being debated during that time. The information I gathered helped me give shape to the content and form of the document. In addition, I was able to use the information from other examples to create my own list of rights. I provided different cases and scenarios in which undocumented immigrants can assert their rights to authority figures, such as the police or detention agents. Further, doing this kind of research allowed me to see the parallels between the policy and the community mobilization department. My supervisor suggested that I talk to Verónica in the policy department for assistance. Afterwards, I was working with two supervisors, and had found a new interest in the intersections of policies and their impacts on communities of color.

I chose to undertake the task (along the with the staff) of following the latest debates, policies, and announcements on reproductive health and immigration nationwide. This was particularly helpful in staying in tune with the conversations that swept the office when time
allowed it, and thinking and writing my blog posts that would be posted on the Latina Institute’s website.

Aside from this and the projects for the CM department, Verónica asked me to find sites that announced, analyzed or provided information about the latest state level policies on reproductive health and immigration. Although at first I was thrilled about this project, I wasn't very consistent with it due to scheduling. I also helped her create a time line on LGBT issues and the ways in which they intersected with immigration policies. Previously, the Latina Institute had created a time line on immigration and reproductive health and continues to give workshops on these topics around the country. This year, Verónica took the initiative to write an entire report on LGBT immigrant communities in the US in an attempt to build on the Latina Institute’s work and create more consciousness about LGBT issues through the reproductive justice framework. The time line will also be accompanied by a workshop in September.

However, beyond working on CM projects and assisting the policy department, I took the initiative to build on the idea of creating a reference book for the organization. The book would consist of a list of contact information of abortion clinics and immigration attorneys from New York City, which staff members can use in case people call to seek help or ask for information about abortion clinics or lawyers, which apparently happens frequently, and can be directed to these places. My idea was to call the clinics and lawyers to collect contact information of bilingual people who would be able to help Spanish-speaking folks, especially undocumented immigrants, so they can feel less insecure about calling. My idea for this was also to create some type of relationship or connection with these clinics and lawyers, since this could work perfectly towards expanding the organization's advocacy work.
However, given that the internship ran for ten weeks, it was difficult for me to concentrate on new projects and commit myself to them while working on other things. To me, it was more important to work first on the projects for the summer, and be of any assistance to both my supervisors as well as in the office in general. As a result of making sure that I was always available for my supervisors, the interns – when help was needed – other staff in the office, etc., the internship became a more fulfilling experience. Working interchangeably with two supervisors on numerous tasks (sometimes simultaneously), receiving appropriate feedback on my work, taking on all kinds of challenges and as many as I could, and making compromises served me well in developing my work and skills in a quick and concrete fashion.

Lastly, I documented my own story about experiences with my sisters in Dominican Republic and the topic of abortion. I think that if it weren’t for the blogs I wrote, the shoe letter I helped design for the 2nd Annual Latina Week of Action for Reproductive Health, the story would have been the second best highlight of my internship. In the piece, I tried to show the significant influence that religion has over my sister's views and choices when it came to abortion, and argued that reproductive health policies in the Dominican Republic have not gained much recognition due to the state's deep connection to the church and religious beliefs. I enjoyed writing the piece because I was able to draw from personal experiences with my sisters to emphasize the lack of social justice in the Dominican Republic, and since I was able to incorporate a lot of what I learned at Latina Institute.

The challenges, when they came, were often related to the relationship I felt I had with the work that I did. That is, I often found myself questioning every aspect of my abilities to do reproductive justice work in general. Increasingly, I realized that my knowledge about
reproductive rights was limited in most of the areas or departments that constitute the organization. Even the policy research I had carried out determinedly at the beginning became an obstacle for me. I realized then that the insecurities I needed to overcome were related to my own work ethics. For example, I was not sure how to fill the role as an male intern in a predominantly female oriented space carrying out reproductive rights work, engaging gender perspective into my work (in the written documents), not negotiating spaces with staff members and not communicating any of these issues with the staff, including my supervisors. In fact, I never addressed any of my difficulties or insecurities to my supervisors perhaps until the end of the internship, during my exit interview. Generally, however, there was a lack of internal communication between the CM interns and staff due to my CM supervisors' agenda and itinerary plans, which might have had a significant influence over my choices. By the time I had the chance to dialogue with my supervisors, I had learned to cope with the situation and learned to overcome many of my personal, ethical or moral insecurities. Each day I faced these challenges, I tried finding the crux of the situation and many times share them with Paola. She was very understanding and gave me helpful advice. Although the challenges were more mental than anything else, it was important for me to overcome them in order to continue developing my work in the proper direction.

I think that the lessons I learned from these experiences stemmed from the fact that there was some lack of internal communication in the New York office. This did not wholly affect the work that Paola or I did, though we all (including staff) came across some conflict during the 2nd Annual Latina Week of Action. Although the work was properly and evenly divided, the communication between the D.C. office and the office in New York was weak at some points,
causing a lot of confusion as to when and how the work was going to be done. The lack of communication didn't entirely impact my overall experience at the Latina Institute either, even though I would have liked if staff and interns could have interacted more frequently in the New York office. This, perhaps, might have enhanced my experience working with the staff and might have also strengthened my relationships with them.

However, I learned a great deal about the ways in which organizations operate and are operated through these very unprecedented experiences. It seems like sometimes I had to do the required work to learn their proper logistics, while other times I had to observe my environment in order to grasp the ways everyone else produced the organization’s advocacy work in the office. All of these were useful tools. Watching the staff play their roles, listening to their dialogues (though sometimes I didn't have a clear idea of what it was being discussed and sometimes I avoided them), working collectively, and even answering the phone were all great tools for me to learn about and from the organization.

From my experiences this summer, I think that the Latina Institute has a strong voice in the reproductive justice movement, and increasingly in the communities of color. Like their partner organizations, such as the Guttmacher Institute, their work is dedicated to teaching the public, particularly the government, lobbyists, policy makers and so on, the significance of certain statistics. Through the efforts of the Community Mobilization department, they are preparing generations of Latin@s students for the future of the organization's movement. In this sense, it's clear to me that the Latina Institute has more on its hands than the amount of staff involved with the advocacy work. I think that the background history, personality and commitment of each individual staff is enough to propel this type of work. However, I have also
noticed that there is a lot of potential for the organization to reach out to younger generations, galvanize them to do social justice work, and to consider including more male interns/staff into their programs, as this could bring different and fresh ideas to the table.

Overall, I have been very fortunate for having had the opportunity to see closely how this advocacy work was being done, along with its serious and hard-working staff. I have gained a lot from the reproductive justice framework that is being put out by the organization. It has taught me well to think through the intersections of race, class, gender, and possible ways to advocate for social justice. Along the way, I have learned more about my abilities and where I hope to take my knowledge and passion for social justice into the future.